

AT THE CROSSROAD: A LUTHERAN CONFSSIONAL RESPONSE TO  
THE QUESTION OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BELIEVE IN JESUS  
IN TODAY'S RELIGIOUSLY PLURALISTIC WORLD

A Professional Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
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*This professional project, completed by*

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*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
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fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

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## Abstract

### At the Crossroad: A Lutheran Confessional Response to the Question of What It Means to Believe in Jesus in Today's Religiously Pluralistic World

Ray F. Kibler III

Traditionally, the Christian Church has confessed Christ Jesus as its Lord, Savior, and God. But today, several thinkers both from within and without the Church are suggesting that this confession is no longer valid for today's religiously pluralistic world. Rather, they claim that there are other ways to speak of Jesus which make sense and bring meaning to today's societies. Many if not most of these thinkers no longer regard it important that one believes in Jesus and invites others to believe in Jesus, too.

This project is a short booklet for use by lay members of Lutheran congregations to explore the topic of Christianity, Lutheranism, and the world religions. Though it treats a theological topic, it is written in a non-technical style, for this study assumes that its readers have had little exposure to and interest in writings on theology.

Chapter 1 examines some representative views of several other-than-Lutheran thinkers who have made creative contributions to the subject in an effort to find new ways to

speak of Jesus in today's religiously pluralistic context. Chapter 2 examines some current trends in thought among American Lutherans on this same subject. Chapter 3 examines the Lutheran Confessions themselves as found in The Book of Concord, with the intent of discovering how these Confessions relate to the topic. Chapter 4 is the author's suggestion of what a Lutheran Confessional response to the issues raised might be.

Again, this is a non-technical piece which for the readability of its intended audience does not include an overabundance of wordy end notes and references. But while intended for the lay reader, its purpose also is to initiate dialogue and to raise questions among Lutheran theologians in America themselves--among all Lutherans in the country--concerning this most crucial debate which must be settled soon in the Church today.

## Acknowledgements

All biblical passages quoted by the author are to the Revised Standard Version.

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## CHAPTER 1

Which Way is the Right Way  
to Speak of Believing in Jesus?Two Opposite Views: Mildred's and Manny's

A member of the congregation I serve is a missionary. No, she doesn't serve in a local church or a hospital overseas. She is an elderly widow living alone in her apartment. Her landlord, knowing that she has no relatives nearby to care for her, looks after her every day: helping her make bank deposits and pay bills, driving her to doctors' appointments, and assisting her in far more ways than she could ever count. Every time I come to visit, Mildred tells me over and over of how wonderful Mohammed and his family are to her. But she also tells me about her conversations with him about religion. Mildred, who came to the U.S. from Europe decades ago, is a lifelong member of our denomination. Mohammed, who brought his family from the Middle East a few years ago, is a Moslem. Mildred reports that whenever they talk about their religious beliefs, she tells him that Jesus Christ is the world's only Lord and Savior. Mohammed affirms that Jesus is a great prophet, but vehemently denies that

Jesus could ever be God. Mildred, a missionary in her home who will never stop telling Mohammed about Jesus, laments, "He is truly a blessing to me. He and his family take such good care of me. But it's such a shame that spiritually he is lost. If only he would believe in Jesus, he would be saved and have eternal life."

"Go...and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19).<sup>1</sup> For centuries, Christians like Mildred have taken these words to heart as their Great Commission to speak of Jesus as the Christ. Their mission has been to tell the Gospel to everyone who has not heard of Jesus or who has refused to believe in Him so far. Why? They are convinced that those who are saved are only all who believe in Jesus and thus will live forever with God in Heaven beyond the time they die on earth. Accordingly, they are worried about those who are lost because they do not believe in Jesus and thus will be condemned forever to eternal suffering and death apart from God in Hell. Therefore, nothing is more important to these Christians than to invite others also to follow Jesus, specifically by believing in Him as their Lord, Savior, and only God. Are they right?

Manny wasn't a missionary like Mildred, but he was esteemed by members of our congregation to be one of the most genuine Christian servants we had ever known. If you needed a true and reliable friend, whoever you were, you could count on Manny. Unfortunately, Manny could not count on his

physical health. One morning, he telephoned me to say that he'd just gotten some bad news from his doctor and wanted me to visit him at his home so he could receive the Sacrament. It happened that Manny would die five days later. At his funeral, Manny's family and friends all testified to his love for Jesus and his devotion to them. But what stuck in my mind as they spoke was something he had said when I'd visited him days before. Manny, who not long before had come to our church from another mainstream denomination, received Christ's Body and Blood in the bread and wine and in this told me that he was assured of the Lord's eternal love for him. At that moment, he said, "I've been following in the news that the religions are getting together. I think it's great that we all do, because all of us, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Moslems, believe in the same God. Don't you think so?" No, I, didn't. I of course believe that there is one God, but also know that adherents of those several religions which Manny had mentioned oppose one another in what they conceive God to be. But I wasn't about to argue this with Manny, a believer in Jesus, now lying on his deathbed. After all, if what he was thinking did turn out to be true, then Manny, who soon would arrive in the life to come, certainly would find this out before me.

I could understand why some would long for a time when "the religions" would be "getting together." Tragically, even some Christians throughout history have had their reasons for speaking about believing in Jesus. They supposed that

the Great Commission gave them the right to use the name of Jesus to exploit others of "all nations" and to force them to adopt their culture. Ultimately, they ended up following human opinions about their empire or race. The primary reason of inviting others to believe in Jesus to be saved was lost.

Today, some Christians, perhaps like Manny or perhaps not, assert that there are many wrong reasons to speak of believing in Jesus. For them, the "Great Commission" with its call to "make disciples" itself causes great problems for people in the modern era. Why? They are convinced that God never has and never will make any distinction between those who are saved for Heaven and those who are lost for Hell. Accordingly, it is not absolutely necessary for one who claims to know God to believe in Jesus. Therefore, they affirm that Christian faith is by no means the sole, true religion for everyone. Rather, Christianity is only one among a countless many religions by which people throughout the world know the truth of who God is for them.

For this reason, some would like to do away with speaking of believing in Jesus at all. At the same time, there are those who say that there now can be found ways to speak of Jesus which make sense and bring meaning to all people in today's religiously pluralistic world. Are they right? What do they say about believing in Jesus? Does it matter today that Christians invite others to follow Jesus, too, believing in Him as their Lord, Savior, and only God?

It is said: Don't Speak of Believing Personally in Jesus

We say nothing new when we admit that we are a world which is constantly at war. To this day, people fight to conquer one another to acquire tangibles (such as land, food, minerals, trade routes, and slaves), to secure their will to live according to their own political convictions, or sheerly to impose those convictions upon others. What is new about the present era is that we people now have the ability to annihilate our entire race in a matter of minutes through the tested use of nuclear weapons or yet publicly untested but equally terrifying biological or chemical technologies. Certainly few would argue that we should do all we can to prevent such a horrifying calamity from ever happening to our planet.

But more often than not, we people fight for religious reasons. Some in all parts of our world demand that others must believe what they believe or die at their hands. To some, Christians throughout history to the present fully participated in such wars over religion. Indeed, traditional ways by which Christians have spoken about God have served as the root causes of these wars. Therefore, some say that Christian thinking must change.

Theologians may no longer regard themselves as handers-on of traditions; they must be prepared to enter into the most radical kind of deconstruction and reconstruction of the traditions they have inherited, including especially the most central and precious symbols of these traditions, God and Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

According to this view, before we speak of Jesus, we ought to rethink who Jesus is and what believing in Jesus means for people today. For example, we Christians have learned by tradition that we need to be saved from our sins, which are acts of personal disobedience against God our Father. Because we sin, we are alienated from God and feel guilt toward God. By that older tradition, Jesus' death on the cross has restored us to a full relationship with God again. But according to this new view, any idea of alienation from God in this way makes no sense to people today. Rather than the result of a personal relationship with God, our human existence is only a part of a long and complex process which shaped our environment and the ways by which we interact with that environment. In this nuclear age, what matters is that rather than seeking our personal salvation we should strive to save our poisoned eco-system and oppressed humans all around us. <sup>3</sup>

How, then, do we speak of Jesus? The idea of personally believing in Jesus as Lord, Savior, and only God bears little or no relevance to today's world. Indeed, to believe in Jesus in this way can be itself a root cause of war. Rather, the way to think of Jesus which makes sense and brings meaning to people today is for us to seek a just society today.

That which makes a mode of existence 'Christian' . . . is not some supernatural quality or group of qualities made available only through Jesus Christ; it is, rather, the valuation as normative for human life of qualities and potentialities which make for reconciliation . . . . And salvation is the

ordering of human life . . . . All movements toward reconciliation and healing and liberation, toward overcoming oppression and alienation and deterioration, are to be understood as the activity of the salvific divine spirit--the spirit of Christ--at work on the world.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, in a world threatened by self-annihilation it does not really matter that people believe in Jesus. Certainly throughout history, knowing Jesus has not been the only factor for motivating people to the "ordering of human life." It could be said that all efforts to bring about peace with justice in human societies and to save life are signs that Christ is at work on our planet. But not every person who does this knowingly or deliberately in the name of Christ. Rather, countless religious and political belief systems unrelated to "Christ" have long been motivating factors for some which have prompted people to work for "salvation" according to this view. Thus, there is nothing unique here about Jesus for human existence. Why, then, should anyone bother to invite anyone else to believe in Jesus at all?

It is said: Don't Speak of Only Believing in Jesus

In the mid-sixteenth century, the astronomer Copernicus advanced a radically new theory about the universe: that the earth revolves around the sun. The world would never be the same. Not only they who scanned the skies by night but, much more, they who pored over pages of philosophy and of religious scriptures by day experienced a thoroughgoing revolution in how they thought of their world and of God. No longer would

anyone ever be able to think of the earth and humanity as central to and special within all existence. Instead, they now would regard theirs as one of many, innumerable worlds.

It is said that we need a new "Copernican revolution" in the ways we think about God and the world today. We Christians are urged to stop thinking of "Jesus" as the center of our religion and start thinking of "God" as being at the center of all religions. This involves a specific

shift from a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths. One then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

According to this view, "God" is the one ultimate Divine Spirit which is found at every time in every human society. These terms do not signify, however, that everyone conceives of them in the same way. For example, a Jew, Moslem, or Christian may picture "God" in his or her mind as one, all powerful Being who alone created the world out of nothing and who has ultimate power over the universe. But for another example, a Buddhist or Hindu may presume in his or her mind a conceptual understanding of the Divine Spirit, termed perhaps as Reality or Truth. These two general conceptions of "God" are entirely different; nonetheless, they are human responses to one Divine Spirit.

Over the ages, such collective responses to that one Spirit have given rise to the various world religions. Every



one of these religions has served as this "Reality's means of revelation to and point of contact with a different stream of human life." <sup>6</sup> This does not mean, however, that one religion is as good as another. In fact (as already stated), people do inflict harm on others in the name of their religion. So according to this view, when a religion fails to motivate people to God-centeredness, it is not viable for human good. Therefore, everyone must evaluate every religion by asking: "Is this complex of religious experience, belief, and behavior soteriologically effective? Does it make possible the transformation of human experience from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness?" <sup>7</sup> In other words: How does this religion in God's name bring salvation to the world?

We therefore can judge the validity and relevance for our world of any religion which is based on belief in "God." But we should not suppose that we could ever discern at all what "God" is. Accordingly, it has been asserted that

the ultimate divine reality is infinite and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind. . . . he cannot be defined or encompassed by human thought. The God whom our minds can penetrate and whom our thoughts can circumnavigate is merely a finite and partial image of God. <sup>8</sup>

If what we know about God is imperfect, then our images of God incarnate in Christ Jesus are partial. Truly, Christians find it helpful to believe in Jesus as God and thus place "Christ" at the center of their religion. However, their Christ-centeredness is based on myth and not on fact.

Why? Neither Jesus nor his disciples ever thought Himself to be God. That Jesus came to be a preacher of God's love cannot be denied. That He was a healer simply means that He grew into such a special "God-consciousness" that he became "open and responsive to God's presence [so that] the divine creativity flowed through his hands in bodily healing and was present in his personal impact upon people with challenging and recreating power." Not even His resurrection was unique, for the resurrection of other people from the dead--adherents of another religion quite different from Christianity--has been claimed.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the Jesus spoken of here came not to be God but instead to be a witness to God.

To term Jesus as, for example, the "Son of God" was simply one way by which some described Jesus in a specific era in history, using mythic language appropriate for its day. But in a later era, this mythic language became the dogmatic concept of Jesus as God Incarnate. To believe in Jesus as God on earth in a unique and once-for-all way is to impose upon Jesus a later interpretation of Him which is based on concepts meaningful then but neither meaningful nor helpful now. According to this view, it would be far better for Christians today to believe in Jesus the way He believed Himself to be, as one inspired by God, than to believe in Jesus as did generations which came after Him, as one who is God.

With this "Copernican revolution" in theology, it does not really matter that people believe only in Jesus.

Christianity continues as a way of salvation for Christians, but thus "revolutionized" it is regarded to be only one way. There are to be found in the world many ways of salvation which are just as meaningful for their adherents as Christian faith is for believers in Christ. If any one religion brings about salvation (however salvation is defined), then that one is as good as any other religion which also brings about salvation. It is good that people believe in Jesus, but it is not good that people believe only in Jesus, and believe in Him as the only God Incarnate.

In this spirit, religious language is the special devotional sentiment of a religious family to whatever it conceives ultimate reality to be. It is spoken in the same way that one says, "I love you" to his or her spouse. He or she would never speak such words of affection to anyone else, nor think that anyone else would say the same to his or her spouse. In the same way, words are spoken to worship Christ by those who believe they have a special relationship with Christ. But it would be wrong to insist that anyone else should speak such words about Christ when they are in a special relationship with their own divine Reality.

It would seem from this that Buddhist or Hindus, whether in Asia or North America, should become better Buddhists and Hindus, and that Jews or Christians in Europe or South America should become better Jews and Christians. If Christians would in practice no longer insist on Jesus as God Incarnate, then

they could help bring about the day when people in the whole universe of faiths could worship, one by one, in peace. Why, then, should anyone invite anyone else to believe in Jesus?

It is said: Don't Speak of Believing in Jesus Only Today

The other day, my friend Mildred told me again that she is worried for her neighbor and friend, Mohammed. As much as she regards him to be God's special blessing to her, she is convinced nonetheless that unless Mohammed believes in Jesus, he will not be saved for eternal life and will perish for his sins in eternal punishment. If what Mildred says is true, and if Mohammed never acknowledges Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God, then he would join countless others in torment who died not believing in Jesus. But if what my other friend Manny had said does turn out to be true, then Mohammed will one day join both Mildred and Manny with Jesus in eternal life, whether or not Mohammed believes. Which way to speak of believing in Jesus is the right way?

To those who do not want to speak of believing in Jesus personally or Jesus only, the idea of most of the world's people going to Hell is totally absurd. Would God, who created and who loves the world, really condemn anyone to eternal punishment if it is His will that all come to eternal life? And besides this: it is one thing to think of everyone who has with full awareness and intent rejected believing in Jesus, thus rejecting the gift of salvation which God offers them. It is another thing entirely to think of everyone else

in the world who has never heard of believing in Jesus at all. These people cannot help the fact that they live in places where they cannot learn about Jesus. Is it fair to consign them to Hell as well?

It is said, Absolutely not! The Bible says that God indeed desires all "to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). Therefore, salvation is universal: centered on Christ and offered to all. Accordingly, one can state that

Every human being is under God's grace and can be saved: whether he be of this or that nation or race, of this or that caste or class, free or slave, man or woman, or even inside or outside the Church of Christ. Every human being can be saved, and we may hope that everyone is.<sup>10</sup>

Surely, both my friends Mildred and Manny would agree very enthusiastically with this assertion. But from it follows another assertion which distinctly defines what it means to say that salvation is universal.

Every world religion is under God's grace and can be a way of salvation: whether it is primitive or highly evolved, mythological or enlightened, mystical or rational, theistic or non-theistic, a real or only a quasi-religion. Every religion can be a way of salvation, and we may hope that everyone is.<sup>11</sup>

Does this mean that one religion is as good as another if it brings about salvation? Not really! Christianity alone expresses the truth about God and therefore proclaims Jesus as the Truth. By this, other religions are not in any way a fulfillment of Christian truth. Rather, Christianity means

that all adherents of other beliefs will one day turn to believe in Jesus as God. <sup>12</sup>

Yet, these other religions still serve for a time as the way by which all who follow them are saved. It is said that

Since, as a matter of Christian faith, the true God seriously and effectively wills that all should be saved and none lost unless by his own fault, everyone is intended to find salvation within his/her own historical condition. Hence, it is his/her right and his/her duty to seek God within that religion in which the hidden God has already found him/her. All this until such time as he/she is confronted in an existential way with the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>13</sup>

These religions are thus offered to humankind as the "ordinary" way of salvation, while Christianity is deemed the "extraordinary" way to believe. The other religions bear the truth insofar that one who believes their way does learn the truth about the Gospel of Christ Jesus, but they are in error because they neither know nor proclaim that Jesus is the Truth. In other words: the religions in general tell about Jesus; Christianity not only tells about but also specifically names Jesus.

If one believes according to any religion, then is that person a Christian? In a way, yes! The religions, generally, are "anonymous Christianity"; their followers are thus "anonymous Christians." <sup>14</sup> When one is born into and lives within a culture which adheres to the beliefs and practices the rituals and customs of a religion other than Christianity, that person is actually preparing to become one day an actual Christian in belief and practice.

Why, then, would they become Christians today? On the one hand, when these people hear the message of Jesus Christ, they would then believe in Jesus and thus be called Christians. On the other hand, they would be saved within whatever religion they believe and practice just the same as people who are not called Christians. The difference between one who is saved by the "ordinary" and one who is saved by the "extraordinary" means of salvation is this: the former person is a member of the Church, while the latter is not. These latter persons will one day become Christians, in eternity.

Does it matter that other people believe specifically in Jesus, or that they invite others to do so? According to this view, not necessarily! In one way, Christians can conclude that God's will is for everyone to be saved--and so they are! Or in another way, Christians can conclude that they who follow whatever their own religions happens to be are indeed saved now--and so they are! It would seem to follow from this view that there is no particular reason why people should follow Christ if they already follow their "God" according to their religion. Christianity bears the truth as Jesus is the Truth, but as truth is to be found also outside of Christian faith, all will one day acknowledge Jesus as Truth. Why, then, should anyone invite another to believe in Jesus today when that person will one day believe in Jesus anyway?

It is said: Don't Speak of Believing in Jesus  
Without Asking Others What They Believe In, Too

None of us could ever live alone. We need one another. A good personal relationship is one in which people can talk over with each other their convictions about themselves and about others. In such a relationship, people know that they trust and will be trusted by one another. They honor that all hold beliefs, but at the same time that all will be open to learn more from others about what they should believe. Through this process, their convictions are strengthened or are changed for the good, for the better of all.

How are we to talk over our convictions about God? We realize (as shown before) that we live within a universe of faiths, people's beliefs about "God." If we enjoy a good relationship with others, we will allow ourselves to be open to change in our attitudes toward ourselves and others. But when speaking of God, do we look for opportunities which will make our own convictions stronger? Or should we be open to change in what we believe about God and the world?

Interreligious dialogue is the process of discussing one's convictions about God with others. Some believe that we Christians should dialogue with other religious persons simply to learn about them. These are individuals who have faith, not simply people in a group whom we would suppose to hold similar beliefs even if they with others adhere to any one religion. We should talk about religious beliefs with



others, sharing with each other our unique perceptions as one individual to another. We Christians therefore should not argue as much over collective creeds of religious belief as we should listen to one another's individual experiences which stem from religious belief. We should come to share ourselves bringing "one Christian's encounters with particular people of other faiths." <sup>15</sup>

In this, we should not intentionally promote our beliefs in a monologue, but rather exchange beliefs in dialogue. Why? All religious beliefs are true, and from them we have much to learn about what we are to believe. When thinking about relationships between Christians and adherents of the two major religious groups of India, one put it this way.

I do not believe that I, or any of us, ought to be in the business of "dubbing" the claims of our neighbours' 'revelations' or 'not revelations.' As a Christian, I can bear witness to what God has done for me, for the people in my family of faith, for those of us who call ourselves Christians, and indeed for all people. But I cannot make claims as to what God has not done . . . . For the affirmation of the Hindu or Muslim as to God's revealing, I must listen to the witness of the Hindu or Muslim and seek to understand what he or she has to say. <sup>16</sup>

But if we believe in Jesus, and if Jesus is the truth, then what more do we have to learn about what we are to believe? It is suggested that we do have much more to learn about God. According to this view, our reason for dialogue stems from the fact that Jesus was for His time and place the revelation of God in the world, but is not so for every time and place.

"Christ" means Jesus, but "Christ" can also mean something else. Contemplating believing in Jesus as the Christ, one has proposed that we speak of Him in a new way, as one who does not alone offer salvation to the world, but who has saved us.

I do not say that God was revealed in Jesus Christ, just like that, absolutely, impersonally; and I suggest that it is not a good thing to say. I do say that God has been revealed to me through Jesus Christ, and has been to many millions of people throughout history . . . . Christian theology has sometimes said that there is a divine revelation in nature, and in history, but has gone on to say that God is (or was) fully revealed in Christ. I suggest that in the future theology may profitably learn to speak a different language. God is not revealed fully in Jesus Christ to me, nor indeed to anyone that I have met . . . .<sup>17</sup>

At this point, one or more of three results could emerge from our dialogues with people who adhere to other religions. One is that we become more and more convinced that we are to believe in Jesus. For example, there is much we Christians can learn from the example of Islam's unyielding faith in Allah which reinforces what we are told in the First Commandment: "I am the Lord your God; You shall have no other gods." Another result is that we learn to appreciate and respect people who follow their own religions by (as has been shown earlier) honoring those religions as bearers with ours of the truth. But a third result--should we allow ourselves to allow it to happen in us--calls for new forms of religious expression which, in fact, go "beyond dialogue."<sup>18</sup>

Proposed here is the "mutual transformation" of religious traditions through dialogue. Two goals are striven for. The

first is "the transformation of Christians, and, through Christian individuals, of Christianity." This means that Christian faith will be enriched as Christians learn and add to or incorporate into their own tradition the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions. At the same time, Christians seek to enrich all forms of religious faith by witnessing to "Christ." Thinking about relationships between Christians and Buddhists, one put it this way.

We may quite properly say that our concern for the Buddhists is that they become better Buddhists. But that can be easily misunderstood. We believe that Buddhists lack something of supreme importance when they do not incorporate Jesus Christ into their Buddhism. We believe they will be better Buddhists when they have done so.<sup>19</sup>

This process begins with dialogue among individual religious believers, but results in a two-way process which goes beyond such dialogue. Practically, that result "is associated with making a contribution to religious communities as communities rather than with the conversion of individual members of the community of Christianity."<sup>20</sup> Those who urge that we be in this kind of dialogue with others about our religious convictions do care that we believe in Jesus. Some affirm that we might invite others to believe in Jesus, too. What is not affirmed, however, is that all people should believe in Jesus only, and that to be a believer in Jesus means also to be a member of that community of believers called the Church. If one believes in Jesus as the Incarnation of God and at the same time lives by that

Commandment which explicitly states that we are to "have no other gods," then one will believe in Jesus instead of all others. And if one is a member of the Church, that person presumably would not be able to adhere to what the Church believes and teaches while also believing what is taught by another faith community which functionally opposes the Church.

Still, everyone in today's religiously pluralistic world must live with each other. As people, as God's creation, we do need each other and can indeed be in dialogue with one another. But to be created is one thing; to be saved is another. Can dialogue be a way by which we Christians might offer salvation to all by inviting others to believe personally and only in Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God?

"Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way"

In July 1989, five hundred Christians came together in San Antonio, Texas to ENCuentro!, a world mission conference sponsored by the World Council of Churches under the theme "Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way." Among the many issues discussed at this event was the subject of "dialogue with living faiths." This was no new topic for the World Council, for decades of study on many of the issues involved in it culminated in the publication of an official set of Guidelines on Dialogue ten years earlier.<sup>20</sup> But it is important to note that among the participants in this conference were seven consulting persons from other (than Christianity) living faith traditions.

In a plenary session, one of them, a Hindu professor at a university in the U.S., greeted the other participants as "fellow lovers of Christ."<sup>22</sup> My friend Manny would have enjoyed hearing that said! Surely, this professor spoke in the spirit of what another speaker termed the need in our "increasingly pluralistic, multi-faith and multi-ethnic" world to "foster the creative interdependency" which many in our world want very much. In this sense, the true and viable Christian mission for today is to serve the world by building such a relationship among people "that makes community possible" in the world. Accordingly, that mission to bring about a sense of religious interdependence is necessarily carried out through dialogue among adherents to various living world faiths. Certainly, these consulting persons were invited to participate because planners of the conference sought, as one of them put it, to serve the world by developing an "authentic dialogue, taking seriously our own faith as well as other faiths."<sup>23</sup> Manny, whom I remember to be a genuine Christian servant, would have stood up and cheered.

But did all this mean that the conference regarded one religion to be as good as any other? Not really. The report of the Section which dealt specifically with "witness among people of other living faiths" concluded that

. . . we would like to emphasize that we may never claim to have a full understanding of God's truth: we are only the recipients of God's grace . . . . Since God's mystery in Christ surpasses our

understanding and since our knowledge of God's saving power is imperfect, we Christians are called to be witnesses to others, not judges of them. We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God.<sup>24</sup>

Manny would have agreed with all these words. But my friend Mildred--had her sight not failed--would have enjoyed reading only some of them. But she would not disagree with everything. Had she heard these, she would have agreed with some of the comments made in the world mission conference. While many others have only imagined in conversation what this could be like, Mildred in her neighborly relationship with Mohammed already enjoys that "creative interdependency" which transcends some others' ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. She certainly would agree that she is only to be a witness to the love of Jesus and is not to judge her friend because he does not yet believe in Jesus. But she would never agree that "we cannot set limits to the saving power of God." Mildred is limited to telling Mohammed that God's salvation comes to everyone only in Jesus. As much as she wishes otherwise for her friend, from what she tells me every time I see her, Mildred remains limited by what she knows to be the Gospel which regards Mohammed to be lost for salvation until he believes in Jesus. Mildred, whom I know to be a missionary in her home, will never stop showing her love for Mohammed by telling him about Jesus.

This chapter has taken a look at some suggested ways of speaking of Jesus which are intended to make sense and to bring meaning to people in today's world. People like Mildred and Manny, in the congregation and in the denomination I serve, are also thinking about such ways. Who is right? Does it matter today that Christians invite others to follow Jesus, too, believing in Him as their Lord, Savior, and God? To whom does this matter? The next chapter will take a look at what some Lutherans say.

## NOTES

## CHAPTER 1

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2 Gordon D. Kaufman, Theology for a Nuclear Age (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1985; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 13.

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5 John Hick, God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism (London: Macmillan, 1980), 5-6.

6 Ibid., 52.

7 John Hick, "On Grading Religions," Religious Studies 17, no. 4 (1981): 463.

8 John Hick, God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion (London: Macmillan, 1973), 139.

9 Stephen T. Davis, ed., Encountering Jesus: A Debate on Christology (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 8, 11-12.

10 Hans Kung, "The Freedom of Religions," in Owen C. Thomas, ed., Attitudes Toward Other Religions: Some Christian Interpretations (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 216.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 210-11.

13 Ibid., 211-12.



14 Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the non-Christian Religions," in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., Christianity and Other Religions (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 75-7.

15 Harvey Cox, Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 5.

16 Diana L. Eck, "The Religions and Tambaram: 1938 and 1988," International Review of Mission 78, no. 307 (1988): 382.

17 Ibid., 384.

18 John B. Cobb, Jr., Beyond Dialogue (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

19 Ibid., 51-2.

20 Ibid., 50.

21 World Council of Churches, Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies (Geneva: WCC, 1979).

22 "Mission in Christ's Way: A Look Back at San Antonio," One World, July 1989: 15.

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24 "Reports of the Sections: Witness Among People of Other Living Faiths," International Review of Mission 78, nos. 311/312 (1989): 351.

## CHAPTER 2

What Some Lutherans in America Say  
About Believing in Jesus

Two Opposite Views: Of Older and Newer Primers

An old primer written half a century ago to teach basic Christian truths to persons interested in the Lutheran tradition put it this way. When describing how the Bible portrays the end of human existence, its author asked this question: "What will God give to His people in the judgment?" and then, citing John 6:40, answered,

He will grant everlasting life to me and to all who believe in Christ.

But then, the author went on to ask, citing Matt. 25:46,

What will become of unbelievers?

and answer,

Because they have rejected God's grace, they shall exist in everlasting separation from God and from all good. <sup>1</sup>

Many who read these words took them to mean that everyone must believe in Jesus. For them, these were a clear calling to invite others to believe in Jesus, too. My friend Mildred and others like her would take a phrase like "bring the good news

of salvation to the heathen" <sup>2</sup> for granted, for they would never question the idea that only believers in Jesus would in the end be saved.

A newer primer written for Lutheran use just half a decade ago puts the matter another way. Within a discussion on the petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come," its author included this poem:

Our world is a world of many faiths:  
Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity;  
each a long search to discover the heart of things.  
Lord, help me to open my mind to the possibility  
of discovering truth in the other person.  
And give me joy in your multi-splendored world. <sup>3</sup>

This author gave no explanation of what the poem has to do with the "kingdom". What does this poem mean to say? Do "many faiths" and "each a long search" imply that Christian faith is one among other world religions as equal paths for "discovering truth"? Is having "joy" in the "multi-splendored world" supposed to mean that we should rejoice that one who believes according to any religion has salvation just as a believer in Jesus?

Answers to such questions were not to be found in this newer primer. But the issues raised have arisen to become important issues within the Lutheran congregation I serve. Among our members and visitors, some are cautious, others are curious. The Church must respond to their inquiries.

### The Cautious

Lois was incensed. Before we began our weekly morning Bible study, she shared utter dismay over something she'd heard over the radio the evening before. Apparently, a panel of three clergy, including a Roman Catholic, a United Methodist, and a Lutheran were featured on a talk show. The subject of their discussion was how Christianity relates to the living world religions. Lois could not believe what she had heard. According to her report, the Lutheran pastor had said that it is wrong to call anyone "saved" or "lost". All religions are pathways to God, and if people would only learn to understand one another's faith, they would realize that everyone worships the same God. Lois's first words to me that morning were, "Is that what we're supposed to believe now?"

We took time during our Bible study to talk over the matter. The participants insisted without hesitation on their belief that one must be a Christian in order to be saved for eternal life and that it is wrong for anyone to say otherwise. I assured Lois that I personally knew no pastor or teacher in our denomination, much less of any official statement of belief, that would even come close to such an opinion as that expressed by the pastor on the talk show. The members of my Bible study--who are faithful members of the congregation I serve and most of whom are lifelong Lutherans--appeared to rest assured that this was really so. Nonetheless, many remain wary of and are on the watch for such novel and

heretical statements as those which Lois reported. They would agree wholeheartedly with the stance taken by that old primer, and would wonder why a poem such as the one included in that newer primer has shown up in the catechetical materials of their denomination. I think of these people as **the cautious**. When comparing the Christian faith to the many world religions, and when thinking of what a Lutheran opinion of this subject would be, they most likely would accept one particular point of view.

#### We Alone Have the Truth

Whether participants in a weekly Bible study or pastors and teachers of the Church, the cautious insist that it is necessary for one to believe in Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God in order to be saved. There is no other way for them to be faithful to Christ in today's religiously pluralistic world.

What does the term "pluralistic" mean? Some insist that this word is properly understood to mean a vast number of human settings. There are of course social and political distinctions between nations. Varying cultural customs between peoples are a "given." These simply have always existed in our world and in themselves are to be accepted from one society to another. But when "pluralistic" denotes matters of religion, then its meaning is entirely different. To respond to the inquiries of the cautious, who are concerned that "what we're supposed to believe now" is a new attitude which is a radical departure from what they confess to be true

Christianity, some American Lutheran thinkers urge that no Christian can ever entertain the notion of pluralism in religious belief. Problems begin indeed when the acceptance of cultures includes the acceptance of their religious beliefs. One put it this way.

Many times, the term "pluralism" is used to imply that everything and every idea is of equal value and worth. Although that notion can help encourage a proper tolerance of others, it also raises serious questions about values and truth. In the world of morals and religion, the result is predictably an unacceptable ambiguity and relativism.<sup>4</sup>

"Pluralism," for this view, is the stance "that all religions have an equal claim on truth, and must be regarded as alternative ways to God."<sup>5</sup> With this attitude, there can be no dialogue but rather only sharp resistance. This is because doctrines--those statements of belief about God and the world which the Church formally agrees to be true--must be upheld without question. According to this view, any church which bases its beliefs on anything else is clearly in error because at specific times God has guided the Church as the historic community of faith to decide precisely what those doctrines should be for all time. For this reason, someone asserted:

Not surprisingly, the same pluralistic mind-set exists within Christendom. Those who deny the particularity of Christianity among world religions often extend their argument to claim that it is legitimate, if not desirable, for divergent theologies to exist within the church. Such a notion is totally contradictory to the Biblical and confessional understanding that we embrace . . . .<sup>6</sup>

This is to say that we Lutherans alone (specifically, for the person quoted, this branch of Lutherans alone!) have the truth. Should we hold it to ourselves and ignore people who adhere to other beliefs? By no means!

. . . our task in the midst of such pluralism is to confess Christ--and to do so boldly and clearly. Ironically, the very pluralistic mind-set that concerns us also provides us with that opportunity, for it recognizes our right to speak, too. And speak we must! For, in this pluralistic age as in every other, "There is no other name under heaven given by men to which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, 20).<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, no Christian should be arrogant in approach. Sometimes, one can become arrogant toward another when one is afraid of that other person. Arrogance can even result from one's being unsure of his or her own convictions. To show how one really can be confident in proclaiming the Gospel, another spokesperson for this persuasion toward "truth" had stated several years earlier that

My...eagerness to accept pluralism means that I believe that they have every right to speak their peace, but it also means that those who believe that there is indeed a 'faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3) have the right and duty to proclaim this faith openly and unequivocally as part of their contribution to the pluralistic conversation . . . .<sup>8</sup>

I don't know Lois and all the cautious in my Bible study group to be arrogant people. They are quite familiar with what it means to make new friends in their community and to engage in "pluralistic conversation" with them. Their neighbors have come to their city from every continent, follow

every major religious tradition on earth, and speak over sixty languages. They encourage their neighbor's children to attend our congregation's elementary school, and are always welcoming to those children and their parents who come to worship each Sunday. But their aim is always to invite these people to believe in Jesus. They are cautious of, and even on guard against, anyone's suggestion that in matters of faith, they and their neighbors are saved, equals among equals, before God. Rather, like Mildred (who is physically unable to attend the Bible study), Lois with all the cautious I know tell me often from week to week their concern that their neighbors are lost--and assure me that they do what they can to tell their neighbors about Jesus.

Some of those neighbors see the issue differently. Their questions also call for response.

#### The Curious

Henry had not heard that radio program, but said he had been reading and watching other media reports about some contemporary trends in interreligious rapprochement. The idea fascinated him. A few moments before I was to begin my evening class, he expressed his utter delight in learning that Jews and Christians can talk together in dialogue without trying to convert each other, and that in some places Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians had prayed together for world peace. He then said, "Finally, people are starting to realize that we all worship the same God."



Henry, like some other adults I know, wants to explore in depth the subject of Christianity and its relationship to the world religions. All but a few of these people are members neither of the congregation nor of the denomination I serve. Other than those few members, some are actively involved in other congregations, but most attend worship infrequently or not at all. Henry and others like him were long ago repelled by what they regarded to be the narrow-minded teachings of the churches they attended as children. But some of them were now sitting in our church building on a weekday evening because as their children attend our congregation's Lutheran elementary school, these parents are required to attend, along with all persons interested in joining our congregation, my seven-session course on what the Lutheran Church believes and teaches. I generally open my classes with a presentation on some aspect of the Church's teaching, but then immediately solicit questions from participants to gain a context for group conversation about how this teaching relates to their life concerns. Invariably, one of them asks whether or not one must believe in Jesus to be saved. I think of these people as **the curious**. When comparing the Christian faith to the many world religions, and when thinking of what a Lutheran opinion on this subject would be, they likely would accept several points of view.

#### We Have Something to Learn

To respond to the inquiries of the curious, who are

concerned that what we should adopt now is indeed a radically new attitude toward other religions, some Lutherans in America question that we Christians really know the truth about every matter of life. They suggest it is possible that others might know something of truth, too, and that what they believe can help us to know better what we are to believe.

They affirm that we have something to gain by saying what we believe while listening to what others (who do not share our convictions) believe as well. One form of this view asserts that we actually will become more convinced of Christian truth when we are challenged by hearing what others regard to be true. One put it that as Christians

we neglect much in our faith. There is much more to know about Christ than we know. Listening can help us to understand and it will enable us to witness fully and openly to Christ and let the power of Christ effect its own changes.<sup>9</sup>

How can we do this? In one example according to this view, there is much which we can learn from the Islamic tradition. At its core, the religion of Islam means, literally "the surrendering" of one's life to Allah. Immediately, the Christian can detect a parallel between the Islamic allegiance to God and the Christian command to obey the First Commandment. In this, Islamic spirituality can teach and remind Christians by its example of what it truly means to serve the Lord our God alone. At the same time, to enhance what they believe, Christians can find in other religious traditions helpful models for what they practice, such as

examples of meditation in Buddhist and Hindu life and a respect for Creation, for instance, in Native American spiritualities. Through this, we are made more able to believe in Jesus while we learn to appreciate that which others believe, too. <sup>10</sup>

But we should do more. Another form of the view that we have much to learn from other religions suggests that we ourselves may gain by changing in what we believe. According to this view, we ought to make a few assumptions about these religions. <sup>11</sup> We should affirm that all people yearn for an encounter with a divine spirit, however this is termed or conceived. We ask what is the purpose which God has for people who adhere to other religious beliefs. We become open to the possibility that they and what they believe actually are true. But at the same time, we tell them--we proclaim to them--what Christ has done for us, and trust God to lead both us and our dialogue partners into the truth.

How can we do this? Here we should "draw upon and emphasize the best in Christian theology" when we engage in dialogue with those who adhere to other religions. <sup>12</sup> Again, we can detect parallels with other religions, but this time we are able to conclude that there is much in these religions which we share, upon which we can build a spirit of mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation in common efforts toward a better world. It can be said from this particular position that "the best in Christian theology" is what we share in

common with others, and therefore the "worst" is what we alone claim to believe.

. . . we as Christians are called upon to be sufficiently mature individually and corporately to give up our claims of religious exclusivism, of the religious "one-wayism" which has contributed to the defamation and destruction of millions of other people . . . . As Christians we are called to be sufficiently mature to follow the example of Jesus in making the sacrifices of self necessary for a new and better future for others . . . .<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it would seem that it is not appropriate to talk about believing only in Jesus. Still, we can talk about what Jesus has done for us. But is this all we are to do? No! There is more.

#### Still, We Must Affirm Jesus Among the Religions

Listening to and learning from others does not mean that we should compromise what we believe about Jesus. According to this position, it is never right to propose any sort of "Copernican revolution" (as that described in the previous chapter) to take Jesus out of the center of Christian faith. Speaking of this, one put it:

Such a Christ-less talk of God would seem empty of meaning and, in any case, not true to the specific Christian belief in God and hope for the world. Surely, Christ is at the center of Christian faith because Jesus is not other than God. He is Immanuel, God with us--and not only for us, but for others, for all.<sup>14</sup>

Many people throughout the world do want to hear from Christians about Jesus, whether they themselves are Christians or not. Therefore, it is up to Christians to remain true to what they believe about Jesus.

But Christians hold some specific beliefs about Jesus. Those who want to displace "Christ" with "God" at the center of religious conversation will affirm happily that many religions do include a place for Jesus as a great prophet and teacher or a great spiritual follower of God. Judaism will honor Jesus, but not acknowledge Him as the Messiah. Islam will revere Jesus as one of the four special messengers sent by God (among Moses, David, and Muhammad) to be a great teacher of God's ways, but they will not believe in Him as God. Hinduism will assert that one can believe in Jesus, but not believe in only Jesus and certainly not believe in Him as the only Incarnation of God. Buddhism will draw parallels between Jesus and the Buddhas in teaching and in spiritual life, but Christ's cross remains an offense to this tradition. Ultimately, the Christian confession that Jesus is both God and a human being continues to separate belief in Jesus from adherence to religion.

Therefore, according to this view, we truly are to affirm Jesus to all people as their Lord, Savior, and God, too. Perhaps, now, the matter is settled. We can say that one who believes in Jesus is saved. But what about those who have not yet believed in Jesus? At the end of time, who will be saved?

#### We Should Not Predict the End

There is something which some Lutherans in America today are not saying and are encouraging all others to not say as well. They insist that we should not make predictions of what

really will happen at the end of human existence. Such things are only for God to know.

It has already been stated that Jesus must always be affirmed as the one Incarnation of God. Yet, it has also been noted that we Christians can learn from other religions, even to the point of our own beliefs being changed for the sake of knowing the truth. Does this mean that God is as truly revealed to those who believe by way of other religions as He is revealed to those who believe in Jesus? If so, all in the end would be saved. If this is true, then does it really matter after all that people believe in Jesus?

What does it mean to be saved? For Mildred and others like her, to be saved means that those who believe in Jesus are given the gift of life forever with God in Heaven beyond the day they die on earth. But there are to be found many different understandings of what the term "salvation" is.<sup>15</sup> Within innumerable Christian traditions to be found in our world--and among many who attend my evening classes on Lutheran belief and practice--we will find not one meaning, but rather many. Salvation has been taken to mean eternal life. It has also been directly connected to the forgiveness of sins, liberation from unjust political systems, food and shelter for the hungry and homeless, a sense of meaning in life (however this is defined), and the building of human relationships both personally and collectively--among a myriad of countless other conceptions. Salvation can take place now

and/or in the future. Add to this variety of views the infinity of images to be found in all world religions. The idea of positing one single definition of the term "salvation" becomes incomprehensible. Accordingly, we cannot understand fully what salvation could mean for everyone, but we only can have some idea of what it means for us.

Who is the Savior? Both my cautious and curious would agree that this term specifically means the person of Jesus. But beyond this, as before, they would express a variety of understandings of who Jesus truly is. To some, Jesus is remembered particularly at Easter to be the one who won the final victory over sin and death. To others, Jesus is remembered particularly at Good Friday as the sacrifice for our sins. To some, Jesus was the greatest teacher who ever lived. To others, He was a great miracle worker or a courageous political revolutionary.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, one could honor or believe in Jesus as one, as many, or as all of these.

What role do the religions of the world play in God's plan of salvation for the world? The cautious most likely would state, "None," while the curious together could speculate, "Many." Some American Lutherans, in the spirit of my curious, propose that God is at work in all people in this way.

The gospel is the announcement that God in Christ is drawing all people unto God. The God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ is none other than the God at work in all religions as the power of their origin and destiny . . . . Religions live and move and have their being in the stream of

history. There they all inevitably come into contact with the Christian movement that announces to them a new and unexpected future beyond their own way of ordering the world.<sup>17</sup>

Do the religions, then, serve as a preparation for people to know Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God? For some, this is so. It is for them God's will that all be saved, which is what we Christians certainly should hope will happen. God, in the end, will bring all to Himself, and then all will believe in Jesus. As Christians, we are to announce Jesus to all that they might believe in Him now. But some people might think, Why go to the effort of doing this if all will eventually believe anyway?

For some others, this is not quite so. People certainly will be brought to God in the end, but not all will know Jesus. Rather, these will have been led through life, perhaps without their knowledge, by whatever "anonymous Christ" has been with them.<sup>18</sup> It would seem here that believing specifically in Jesus by name is not of importance. Some people, too, might think, Why go to the effort of announcing Jesus if one doesn't need to believe in only Jesus anyway?

I really don't know that Henry and the curious in my evening class would ever deny that it is important to believe in Jesus. During my conversations with them as individuals, I learned that the fact that they who are parents have chosen for their children to attend our congregation's Lutheran school is evidence that they care that their children know who



Jesus is. In this, they deeply appreciate the Christian faith, which many of them take to mean "Christian values" or "Christian morals." Within this, they appreciate learning about Lutheranism, and are most courteous to hear and to discuss the dogmas--specific statements of belief--of our tradition. But their attitude is always to be open. They remain curious to find some way to affirm what they perceive to be the presence of God manifest in all religious expressions. Using almost the same words I remember my friend Manny had said before he died, Henry and the curious really want to find some way to be certain that we all believe in the same God.

The cautious and the curious differ sharply from one another when they compare the Christian faith to the many world religions. But opposite as their positions are, both want to think that the Lutheran tradition will support their respective opinions. Today, more and more Lutherans in America are thinking about having to think hard about the issues their questions raise--and they are not finding their answers in consensus with one another. People from outside the Lutheran family are speaking and writing eloquently about God and the world religions; inquiries from within the Lutheran family arising from such lectures and essays call for response.

#### The "Cosmic Christ"?

Our denominational magazine reported that a widely known

thinker on the subject (who is not a member of our denomination) served as the keynote speaker for one of our major conventions. Members and other associated with the congregation I serve saw that account. The cautious were shocked but the curious seemed delighted to read what this speaker was reported to say.

As we move to the level of creation itself, there is no Buddhist ocean, no Anglican river, no Methodist rain forest, no Jewish river, no Taoist desert. We are in this together, and it is all God's work. The Holy Spirit, the spirit of God, touches us all.<sup>19</sup>

The curious within my congregation were pleased. But in their favorable response, they who are lay participants in local churches are joined by some of our denomination's pastors, teachers, and other leaders. As examples: I met some Lutheran pastors who had heard these words spoken. These pastors are among the curious. For them, here at last is a message for Lutherans to affirm: that we do live--as that newer primer had put it--in a "multi-splendored world" of "many faiths."<sup>20</sup> What a marvelous resource for ministry, they claim! Finally, someone has said in a spirit of strong conviction and urgency that we should affirm that as people who know that God has created us, we all are one.

The cautious in my congregation were not pleased. In their negative response, they are joined by some other of our denomination's pastors, teachers, and leaders. These are among the cautious. For them, talk about a world in which we

are all worshipping the same God is utter heresy! It is indeed true that God has created all people and, as those created, we may be affirmed as one. But one must sharply distinguish between creation and salvation, confessing that while God has created the world, God in Christ and only in Christ Jesus has offered salvation to this world. To define this distinction, one prominent Lutheran teacher wrote that

Christ is constitutive of the world's salvation. It is in account of Christ that salvation happens. We define salvation on the model of what God has accomplished for the world and humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, and only there.

On the basis of salvation through "Christ alone" and justification by "faith alone," Lutheran theology has no certain grounds for teaching that the religions as such are ways of salvation and that people are saved by whatever religion into which they happen to be born. Outside of Christ and apart from the preaching of the gospel, there are no known historical alternatives which may be theologically accepted as divinely authorized means of salvation.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, there are no resources for ministry, they claim, apart from the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God. Accordingly, until we all know and believe that Gospel of salvation, we all are not one.

Does it matter that people believe in Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God, and invite others to believe in Him, too? That old primer written half a century ago taught that according to the Lutheran tradition it is a basic Christian truth to respond, "Yes"! All we can know is that they who believe in Christ are saved, and they who have "rejected God's

grace" are lost. The next chapter will look at how the Lutheran tradition tells why this is so.

## NOTES

## CHAPTER 2

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## CHAPTER 3

## What the Lutheran Confessions Speak of Believing in Jesus

Why Speak of "Lutheran" Today?

I am a Lutheran pastor. I serve a Lutheran congregation, which in turn operates a Lutheran elementary school. The word "Lutheran" is meant to be there, to be affirmed and celebrated without apology. It describes both who we are and what God has called us to be. Were we to try to ignore the term or attempt to eliminate it from our vocabulary, we would not be honest with who we are.

Of course, not everyone who worships within our church building is a Lutheran. Only a very tiny minority of the families who send their children to our school call themselves Lutherans. Martin Luther, who would never let himself be called a Lutheran, would have approved of this. The Lutheran tradition is not an institution of people within Christendom. Rather, Lutheranism is properly defined as a movement of faith within the one, universal Christian Church. But it still stands as a distinct movement, and as such, must be named and known for what it is.

Though very few of our school's teachers are members of

a Lutheran congregation, all have agreed to teach their students about matters of faith according to the Lutheran tradition, just as most of our students' parents acknowledge that their children will receive religious instruction with a distinct Lutheran flavor. Not everyone has agreed with this, though. One of our teachers whose children attended our school decided one day that they would go elsewhere. Mark, a member of another church which proudly billed itself "non-denominational," just couldn't understand all this. "Why talk about being "Lutheran?" he asked me. "Aren't we all Christians? Can't we just say so?" What bothered Mark was his claim that some of his colleagues, along with me as the pastor, were teaching his children what he termed to be "the doctrines of man" instead of "the word of God" as he understood it.

In my last conversation with him, I heard Mark to say, "If there is one Christ, then why do we think that this Christ would want us to have so many different churches? If the Bible is God's word, and God's word tells us what truth is, then why can't we all go right to the Bible and find in it for ourselves what the truth is on which we should all agree?" His words sounded plausible. Yet, Mark failed to take seriously some specific realities about communities of faith.

Why speak of "Lutheran" today? Because that's the way things are! The problem with the position which Mark and others of his mindset take is that it does not take seriously



God's acts in history. We are what we are in our present because of what people before us have been led to think and to do in the past. We do not merely imagine for ourselves what we are to believe today, nor are we to think that we in our communities of faith invent our own beliefs as though these somehow begin with us. Rather, we are to acknowledge that for Christian faith, the God who has called communities to believe in Jesus in the past moves us to believe in Jesus in the same ways in the present. We do live with yesterday's factions within the Church, and many of these are the result of tragic misunderstandings and misguidances over the history of the Church. But all expressions of the Church which confess Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God for salvation are valid testimonies to Christian faith. To keep the Church in true faith, God guides the Church to know the truth as it was taught in the past so that the Church may learn from it what shall be regarded to be truth in the present. At the same time, the Church should beware that error comes about whenever people interpret the Bible as whatever they wish, without regard for that truthful past.

Thus, Christians may affirm that today's churches of which we are members, by distinct denomination, result from what God led yesterday's churches to think and act in their confession and testimony to Jesus. These churches are not accidents, but rather are those factors in history by which God has made us what we are. We will do well to acknowledge

that we can never make these go away. Better still, we would be wise to let the past Church's formal confessions of faith serve as historic norms for interpreting the Bible, in order to teach us what we ourselves should believe and teach today.

That is why we speak of "Lutheran." While Lutherans ought never make the arrogant assumption that they alone know the truth, they nonetheless ought to affirm that God has placed them within a particular historic tradition. Thus, they are to use responsibly the confessions they have been given, and have faith in God to inform them of their present by reminding them of their past.

#### Scripture and Confession

"You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say." When we compare sample teachings of some heterodox religious groups in America (including the Latter Day Saints, the Watchtower Society, and the Unification Church--all of which are rooted in a nineteenth-century American spirit of revivalist individualism and from which on occasion some of my participants came), participants in my classes on what the Lutheran Church believes and teaches quietly ponder that the Bible can be either used or misused. How can one make the distinction? We acknowledge that we interpret Scripture according to a predetermined standard, a tradition which we learn consciously or subconsciously.

One learns about the Lutheran Christian tradition of believing in Jesus by drawing upon the resources of the

Lutheran Confessions as found in the sixteenth-century collection, The Book of Concord.<sup>1</sup> Chosen specifically as resources and as an introduction to this large collection are: the so-called Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds, which originated in the earlier centuries of the Christian movement; and the Augsburg Confession (with at times the Apology to that Confession) and the Large and Small Catechisms of Martin Luther, all of which originated in the beginning decades of the Lutheran Christian movement.

As interpreters of Scripture, these were distinguished during the sixteenth-century Lutheran Reformation in this way. The Bible is and remains the "norming norm" for all which we Christians believe and teach. Scripture is the means by which we are guided by God to learn all truth about God and the world.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the Confessions are a "normed norm" for what is believed and taught. They are so because they are determined by and agree with Scripture. This does not mean that they are as authoritative as Scripture, but rather that they are to be taken seriously by those who will adhere to them as a testimony to God's guidance to the truth which Christians are to believe and teach.

Because this was not an issue for those who drafted them, these Confessions do not deal directly with speaking of believing in Jesus within a religiously pluralistic world which includes religions other than Christianity. But they did arise from within a world in which a plurality of

understandings of Christian truth were to be found. Because of their origin in this particular kind of Christian pluralism, there is much which Lutherans can learn about God from them as they grapple with the issue of religious pluralism today. That is what such historic statements of faith are for.

### God

Some I have heard (as described in the previous chapter) want to affirm that within the world religions "we all worship the same God." Within such a statement is the assumption from it that all people have an approximate if not similar knowledge of what that term "God" really means. But God's name is infinite in ways beyond comprehension. Among these meanings, some may think of God as being an autonomous being in the heavens. Others may conceive of God as being their own "higher consciousness" or as their "higher self" which may or may not imply the presence of a divine being outside themselves. Some simply use the name as a simple part of speech to swear or curse when they are angry without having any idea whatsoever of what they are saying.

It sounds so obvious, yet all too often it gets overlooked. Before we make any statement of religious faith, we must first understand who "God" is. The Nicene Creed describes God first as "one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible."<sup>3</sup> This means that God made all things out of nothing, because

there was and is no existence without God. God has no beginning and no end.

The Confessions are not concerned to define who or what God is. Indeed--as will be seen later--any quest to figure out God in this way is itself a sign of human error. But this much can be known: God made and continues to make all things, and thus everyone on earth is cared for by this creator God. In all life processes, God provides to all people everything which they need to live each day. This one God gives this to all for everyone's benefit. In this particular way, we can say that God is thus revealed to all people.

One can safely say that all people are able to know that some sort of god exists. But the Confessions are concerned to show the importance of one's own particular relationship to God. No one dealt with this issue more than Luther. When offering an explanation of the First Commandment, he stated that

A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in him with our whole heart. The trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.<sup>4</sup>

Here emerges the sharp difference between worshipping the true God and worshipping an idol. The true God, the creator of the world, was, is, and always will be. This God is specific; apart from this, the god of anyone's conception is absolutely nothing at all. Yet, people are quite capable of imagining or conceiving their own god, which is not

necessarily based on any metaphysical encounter with the true God but rather may be an extension of their hopes and dreams for the world. Here, Luther referred to the pagan religions of the New Testament era when he stated

The heathen who put their trust in power and dominion exalted Jupiter as their supreme god. Others who strove for riches, happiness, pleasure, and a life of ease venerated Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or others, while pregnant women worshipped Diana or Lucina, and so forth. Everyone made into a god that to which the heart was inclined. Even in the mind of all the heathen, therefore, to have a god means to trust and believe.<sup>5</sup>

There is therefore only one, true God. But even though the same God is revealed to everyone through everyday life processes, that God is "hidden" from one's full perception as God revealed and known only abstractly through one's observance of creation. In this way, not everyone truly knows God at all.

The trouble is that their trust is false and wrong, for it is not founded upon the one God, apart from whom there is truly no god in heaven or on earth. Accordingly the heathen actually fashion their fancies and dreams about God into an idol and entrust themselves to an empty nothing.<sup>6</sup>

Some, again, want to be confident that through every religion we worship the same God. But is not enough for one simply to have a religion. The true God has a unique identity. To know who God truly is, one must know God as the creator of all things entirely out of nothing, as the God who is entirely something other than what humanity can conceive or desire. This true God is specific, and thus is truly

worshipped only by those who know God as their specific, personal creator. To affirm that God is revealed to everyone on earth in general is one matter, for though God comes to every person, still every one is naturally capable of conceiving God erroneously, only according to his or her own image. Thus, to affirm that God is truly known by everyone is another matter entirely, for God is truly made known to people on earth, not generally but specifically, according to what God chooses for people to believe about their creator and their world.

### Sin

It has been suggested that "we all worship the same God." Tragically, left to our own conscious or subconscious inclinations we end up worshipping only ourselves. Sin--that mindset that ultimately we are like God and therefore are God for ourselves--keeps us from knowing who God truly is.

The Lutheran Confessions assert that it is utterly impossible for anyone to know the true God naturally. Accordingly, the Augsburg Confession stated that

since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God.<sup>7</sup>

In this, we people simply do not have any natural ability to know at all who God really is. God still creates life for us, and still is revealed to us. At the same time, whether

we know it or not, because of who we are all of us are plagued with holding ideas about God and the world which are diametrically opposed to any idea of the true God.

I have found that upholding the goodness of God and the fallenness of human nature annoys and upsets more people than does any other assertion of Christian belief. One angry man who is a member of one of the congregations I once served, told me that he was bored by any sermon I preached which made any mention of natural sin because this notion is irrelevant to the idea of human progress which makes better sense in today's optimistic and progressive world. In another congregation hundreds of miles away, one irritated woman--who never joined a Lutheran church and who attended our church only on rare occasions--became annoyed with me over a primary part in our usual order of worship in which we together confess our sins and are assured that God forgives us. Storming out after the service, she exclaimed to me, "I can't worship here any more. I'm tired of hearing about sin. Maybe that's a problem for others, but I myself don't sin. Maybe if we had a service which reminded us how there are tremendous possibilities for us to make a better world because we're naturally getting better and better in the human race, I'd find that worship would mean more to me." I recalled that the persons in both of these instances had in their own ways each expressed to me their belief that religion is relevant only when it meets human needs--but they defined for



themselves what they saw those needs to be. Each of them felt, as that man so expressed, that "if people would decide to love one another, we could eliminate problems like war and world hunger." But by their diagnoses of the human condition, each of these persons flatly rejected the testimony of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions that humanity's basic human need results from its basic fault: the presence of sin. They would not accept that in its understanding of Scripture, the Lutheran tradition insists that there is no reason for humanity as left to its natural state without knowing God to be optimistic about itself. Rather, we must admit that instead of eliminating world problems and bringing about progressive societies, we people naturally create a destructive world.

Accordingly, all human conceptions of God along with any idea of a generally known divine presence are plainly and simply wrong. In fact, all statements about God apart from having a true faith and trust in God which is brought about in the person only by God are actually lies against God. That's just the way things are! The Apology to the Augsburg Confession explains the matter in this way.

Since nature in its weakness cannot fear and love God or believe in him, it seeks and loves carnal things; either it despises the judgment of God in its security, or it hates him in its terror . . . [It] is not merely a corruption of the physical constitution, but the evil inclination of man's higher capacities to carnal things.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, someone still might object, "That can't

be right! Most people know there is a God." From this follows the assertion that "we all worship the same God." Again--that misses the point! According to the Augsburg Confession, one must make a sharp distinction between making speculations about God and having trust in God. Anyone can say that there is a God, but only those who know God as God is truly revealed can say that they know who God is.

### Christ Jesus

The suggestion "we all worship the same God" through our respective religions would be possible if human beings were able to know God fully in that general relationship revealed to all through creation. But God is fully known to people in that special relationship revealed through salvation in Christ Jesus. Specifically, God is revealed to us fully in Christ Jesus alone.

Who is Jesus? Using the language of the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, the Augsburg Confession spoke of Jesus in a definite statement which says

that God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary, and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus is equally God and human, one and the same at the same time. As a human being, he experienced all things, both joyful and sorrowful, which we face in life. But as God, he

did so without sin. Surely we can look on Jesus as a great man who taught and healed. But most of all, we must look on Jesus as God with us who is our Savior.

Implicit in this is a clear understanding of who God is and who we are. We have seen already that we cannot believe in God naturally, and from this certainly cannot know concretely that God loves and cares for us. The natural thought of God can affect us in several ways. Among these, we will be afraid of God, or decide to ignore the thought of any God at all. For this reason, we must again make a sharp distinction between the "hidden" God whom people know only as abstractly revealed in nature and the God Incarnate whom we know specifically in Jesus. Why it is important that we make such a distinction was illustrated clearly by Luther.

When we were created by God the Father, and had received from him all kinds of good things, the devil came and led us into disobedience, sin, death, and all evil. We lay under God's wrath and displeasure, doomed to eternal damnation, as we had deserved. There was no counsel, no help, no comfort for us until this only and eternal Son of God, in his unfathomable goodness, had mercy on our misery and wretchedness and came from heaven to help us. <sup>10</sup>

To know Christ Jesus, therefore, is to know the God who loves us. Salvation becomes real to us when we know that our creator truly loves us. To not know Christ Jesus, therefore, is to not know God at all. To stress this, the Confessions confirm that Jesus is God by reasserting the Trinity. Using the language of the Creeds, particularly of the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession stated

that there is one divine essence, which is called and which is truly God, and that there are three persons in this one divine essence, equal in power and alike eternal; God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. <sup>11</sup>

But more must be said about Jesus. After affirming that God is fully known in Christ Jesus, one must then affirm that one can come to know God as fully revealed when one comes to believe this: that God came to humanity in Jesus to accomplish one specific mission in a specific way, "to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins." <sup>12</sup> In the Small Catechism, Luther expounded on this mission by writing that Christ

has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his . . . <sup>13</sup>

It is not necessary here to elaborate on the many meanings and implications of Christ's death on the cross for humanity. It is only necessary for the person to believe and to confess that Jesus, the Lord, Savior, and God, died on the cross "for me." This, Jesus accomplished for humanity at one time, in one place, for all time, on the cross.

To know God, therefore, is to know Christ. To know Christ is to know what he has done on the cross. To know what Christ has done is to confess that God is good and to admit that one is a sinner.

On the wall of my study near the desk at which I now write hangs a picture of Jesus on the cross. This particular print is of a painting which the fifteenth-century German artist Matthias Grunewald composed as a study in preparation for painting centerpiece for his now-famous Altar at the sanitarium chapel at Isenheim. The figure of Jesus appears especially mutilated, for the artist intended in this work to portray Jesus as bearing that dreaded skin disease with which patients at the sanitarium were afflicted. The effect is striking and the message is clearly obvious: that Jesus is shown to be the one who "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4). Surely, one could know no greater comfort in life than to believe that God is fully revealed in this Jesus, to love and to save.

Unfortunately, that man described before who was bored with any mention of natural sin told me that he didn't like that picture. "It's too negative," he claimed. "If we want our church to present a positive image--and don't we?--then we don't want such gloomy junk hanging around here." According to the Lutheran tradition, by what he said this man has shown that he does not truly know Jesus. The real tragedy in this is that he does not know God. For anyone can say that there is a God, but only those who know God as God is truly revealed in Christ Jesus who suffered and died "for me" can say that they know who God really is.

### The Living and the Dead

There is one God. God is revealed to us fully and uniquely in Jesus. What, then, about those who do not know Jesus? The Apostles' Creed states that Jesus will "come to judge the living and the dead."<sup>14</sup> This means

that our Lord Jesus Christ will return on the last day for judgment and will raise up all the dead, to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect but to condemn ungodly men and the devil to hell and eternal punishment.<sup>15</sup>

According to this view, only those who know Jesus will be saved. But Jesus is God, and if people cannot naturally know God, how can they know him at all?

First, we are reminded again that we remain naturally unable to believe in Jesus. The central statement of the Augsburg Confession defined this issue by stating

that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-36 and 4:5.<sup>16</sup>

The ability to know God is something which we receive from God in Christ Jesus. It is nothing ever earned.

But, still, how can we believe in Jesus? Does the ability to believe in Jesus turn out to be something we decide to do? If we cannot naturally believe in God, and if God is known to us only in Jesus, then the notion of our using our

own abilities to believe in Jesus simply doesn't make sense. Isn't there something more to this? To answer this question, the Augsburg Confession went on immediately to make another central statement.

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, and through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this. <sup>17</sup>

So God has actually provided a way for people to believe in Jesus! The ability to know God in Christ Jesus comes when we see and hear the Gospel communicated to us and God the Holy Spirit compels us to believe this Gospel.

But what is the Holy Spirit? Just as many claim to speak of "God," many also claim to speak of the "Spirit." In this, many fail as well to identify and define who or what this "Spirit" is and what it does. It is not so with the Holy Spirit. Specifically, this Spirit is God who comes to us each day to convince us to believe in Jesus. This, with nothing more or less, is the Holy Spirit's mission to us and to all humanity. Luther commented on this well when he stated:

Neither you nor I could ever known anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused

the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given us the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation.<sup>18</sup>

It is necessary, therefore, that Christ be preached. When we hear the message of Christ, God the Holy Spirit moves us to know God the Father--who created the world--by knowing God the Son--who is Christ Jesus--who saved the world. What it means that Christ be preached is simply this: that those who do not know Jesus need to be invited to believe in him by those who do.

Who, then, will be saved for eternal life? Will everyone be saved? If not, what will happen to all who have not been saved? The Lutheran Confessions simply did not treat as a deliberate topic the relationship of the world religions to Christian faith. At the same time, one reference we find does not encourage the idea that everyone will be saved. Luther wrote that even the articles of the Apostles' Creed

divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore, they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

In the end, only those who believe in Jesus as their Lord, Savior, and God will be saved. Certainly, it is not God's will that anyone should be punished for not believing in Jesus. But at the same time, those who follow other



religions are following other gods. They cannot be saved if they do not know the true God in Christ Jesus because apart from Jesus they cannot know a loving God.

Therefore, if these Lutheran Confessions are to be taken seriously as a testimony to God's guidance to the truth which Christians are to believe and teach, then from them we must conclude that Christians must invite others to become Christians, too, believing in Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God.

#### On Being Lutheran Today

As a Lutheran pastor, I am committed to proclaiming the Word and administering the Sacraments according to the Lutheran tradition as this is carried on through the ages in the Lutheran Confessions. I am bound to teach according to these as the predetermined standard by which Scripture is interpreted. They are the testimony to the Lutheran movement within the Christian Church, evidence of a movement to know what is the truth of Christian faith, life, and mission. I and other Lutheran pastors may be criticized by some at times for speaking of "Lutheran" in a distinct sense rather than "Christian" in a generic sense. But to be called Lutheran means for us to uphold a historic expression which claims the truth within the Church universal. We cannot do otherwise.

Yet, that distinction maintained during the sixteenth-century Reformation between the Bible as the "norming norm" and the Confessions as the "normed norm" needs further consideration, interpretation, and application as we enter

the twenty-first century. Not only Biblical scholarship has changed, of course, but it is so obvious yet so often overlooked to Christians that basic presuppositions about the authority of Scripture in faith and life have changed over the last 450 years. Initially, the Lutheran Reformation raised questions about the interpretation of the Bible for doctrine and practice within the Church of its day, as though it was the only movement to do so in its particular time and place. Now, an infinite number of attitudes toward interpreting the Scripture are to be found among persons and movements both within and without the Church today. The Bible is for these attitudes a norm in some way or a reference point in others for claiming the truth about God and the world. Lutherans are not, after all, the only Christians who read the Bible!

Some might suggest that the traditional Lutheran distinction between the "norming" and "normed" norms makes little sense today. Some would posit that for Lutherans to claim the authority of the Bible on the one hand but to assert that the Bible is interpreted properly by the Confessions on the other can make it appear that the Lutheran tradition actually regards the Confessions and not Scripture to be the ultimate judge between truth and error for Church life. Or, some would urge that we Lutherans regard their Confessions simply to be historic guides for what the Church is to believe and teach: historical factors which have made us what we are today but nonetheless which result from debates over Christian

faith and life from one particular time and geographical setting. Thus, the world has changed over four centuries since, and there are now new issues to be addressed such as the relationship of Christian faith to the world religions. When this happens, Scripture as interpreted today could change some essential meanings of Christianity and render much of those old Confessions to be merely bound by the times they were created and thus no longer relevant for modern ages.

But I insist that the Lutheran Confessions really are the best standard we have for interpreting Scripture. This is because as it takes seriously God's acts in history, the Lutheran movement is itself a sign and a testimony to God's unique presence known in the truth of Christ Jesus. Precisely because it is centered on and points to Christ alone as God Incarnate that the Lutheran tradition claims validity for the Church today. We may need to restate in our day that ultimately our norm for belief is not the Scripture as such but, much more, one particular testimony to Christ Jesus lifted up by the historic Lutheran movement, as shown in Scripture, as Lord, Savior, and God. If this is done, we clearly would need to uphold this specific testimony of Jesus among all within the Church and throughout the world religions who think otherwise. The next chapter will look at how this can be done.

## NOTES

## CHAPTER 3

1 Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed., The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959).

2 By no means, however, am I a "biblical inerrantist". Rather, I emphasize the Holy Spirit who speaks through Scripture, and thus would never want the Bible to be thought of as a holy or "magical" book in itself.

3 The Book of Concord, 18.

4 Ibid., 365.

5 Ibid., 367.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 29.

8 Ibid., 103.

9 Ibid., 29-30.

10 Ibid., 414.

11 Ibid., 27.

12 Ibid., 30.

13 Ibid., 345.

14 Ibid., 18.

15 Ibid., 38.

16 Ibid., 30.

17 Ibid., 31.

18 Ibid., 415.

19 Ibid., 419.

## CHAPTER 4

## The Way to Speak of Believing in Jesus Today

Two Opposite Views: Within One Church

"It was devil worship," he said with both anger and dismay in his voice. My friend and colleague, one of our denomination's pastors, told me what had happened at his latest Synod Assembly (an annual convention of one geographic Lutheran judicatory). During the opening Eucharist, someone had inserted into the order of service a Lakota Native American "sage blessing." (Apparently, this happened just as the service was beginning inside the convention hall under someone else's leadership and the Bishop was waiting outside that hall to join the procession in, so that insertion happened without his knowledge and--certainly--without his approval! He subsequently called for direct changes in the way Assembly worship events would be planned and conducted from then on.) My friend was too upset to tell me accurately exactly what was said in the "sage blessing," but did report that many of the delegates to this Assembly--pastors like me and lay members of over 250 congregations like the one I serve--became visibly shocked and then incensed at what they

took to be this "pagan intrusion" upon a Christian Eucharist.

But not everyone who witnessed the event felt that way. Another pastor told me that he found the experience "a meaningful and sensitive call to worship." Several weeks after the Assembly, one pastor who liked and supported including that "sage blessing" communicated this message to all the congregations involved in the incident by writing in the Synod newsletter:

In my opinion, to suggest that the sage blessing was forcing a diabolical act into our Christian gathering is arrogant and demeaning of Native American spirituality.

Who are we to claim an exclusive right to approach God?

The oldest religions on our planet are . . . religions of the native peoples . . . Their nearly universal celebration of the goodness of life and unity of creation are spiritual values we should all treasure.

In my opinion, we need more exposure to the spirituality of different cultures.

What do you think?<sup>1</sup>

To no one's surprise, letters in response poured in to that newsletter's editor. Among those printed in the next several issues were some which harshly criticized that pastor's position. Another pastor wrote that

It is not arrogant to recognize and proclaim the uniqueness, finality, and universal scope of Christ's person and work. His claim is exclusive when He says, "No one comes to the Father but by me."

There are no doubt elements of truth in all religions. But our faith testifies that we approach God through "One Mediator, the man Christ Jesus." This is our greatest message and mission to the world.<sup>2</sup>

But there also were some who reacted to such criticisms

and affirmed the "sage blessing." Still another pastor wrote that

Before we speak, perhaps we must listen and learn. I would sit in the circle with the Lakota and receive a sage blessing even as I spoke the words of the benediction. And I would be assured of my Lord's presence as we marveled over the work and wonder of God throughout the heights and depths of creation.

The Spirit calls us into the world with the creative task of being peacemakers, light bearers, and sharers of good news. While remaining faithful to the grace-gift we have received, we must be on the watch for "sneak appearances" in the unlikely of places.<sup>3</sup>

What was it? "Devil worship?" My friend Mildred might be too polite to say so, but I know she would think so. The cautious in my congregation definitely would call it that. "A meaningful and sensitive call to worship?" My friend Manny might have appreciated it. The curious in my congregation would have been favorable. I'm quite sure that my acquaintances, that man who gets bored when he hears about natural sin and the woman who is convinced that she doesn't sin, would approve of it heartily. I know that speaker who talked about a "cosmic Christ" would have championed and defended the action enthusiastically. All who suggest that there can be found new ways to speak of Jesus which make sense and bring meaning to all people in today's religiously pluralistic world, in varying ways and for differing reasons, would be both sympathetic and supportive. I believe that Luther and the Reformation tradition would call it "devil worship." Yet, we must acknowledge that both parties of



opinion which oppose each other certainly would affirm that they recognize and insist upon the importance of believing in Jesus. At the same time, we must ask if they would also affirm that Christians should invite others to follow Jesus, too, believing in Him as their Lord, Savior, and only God.

God Has Limited Us to Christ and to the Church

Some say that we should not speak of believing personally in Jesus. When we do, we confine ourselves to concepts about alienation from and restoration to God as persons which no longer have meaning for today's nuclear age. We also restrict ourselves to thinking that God is active only in the Church. So instead, we should be prepared to destroy now-meaningless traditions, even "God" and "Jesus Christ," putting in their place new conceptions which build up human life as we strive for a just world. Is this what we should do? No! God has limited us Christians to Christ and to the Church.

To be certain, God is not limited to the Church. For us to define God's activity in the world according to our reasoning would be to not know God at all. We can only know, abstractly, that God does bless all people in the created world whether they realize this or not. All are part of God's created order; we should never presume to judge others even if they do not believe as we do. God, "who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45), creates and loves them as much as us. That these people do not yet believe in Jesus does not

negate the truth, nonetheless, that God in Christ Jesus has offered salvation to them. We may judge their religion as false as it concerns the truth of God, according to the Gospel to which we were called and are bound to believe. But we are not to judge the people themselves for who they are.

In this, we must remember that God has called us as Christians to be who we are: people who do believe in Jesus. God has claimed and saved us to be, specifically, limited to Christ.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:9-10)

We are limited to look for God only as shown to us in Christ Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection. This is not to say that we could never find God at work in our world elsewhere, but rather this means we confess that God cannot ever be known fully apart from Christ. While we do not judge others as persons as they search for God, we must affirm that we--and as far as we know, others--will never know God by any other name than Jesus.

God limits us also to belong specifically to that gathering of people who believe in Jesus which is known as the Church. This consists of all in every time and place who have known Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God. We know that every Christian today has inherited some tradition, based upon

Scripture, of what the Church yesterday believed and taught. In a wider sense, we will do well to recognize and to learn what the Holy Spirit taught that Church to confess as truth in the past, and to build on the Holy Spirit's testimony from that past as that Spirit guides us to believe and teach the truth in the present.

Most congregations in our denomination in this country in the past have used one common book of worship for liturgies and hymns. At present, some question this practice. They--including those who included that "sage blessing!"--argue that since ours is now a diverse world, we must employ a diversity of approaches to make worship meaningful as well as practical for the vast variety of persons who live in today's pluriform society. But several of us resist this trend. Why? Our worship book provides us both a common bond and a helpful limit which defines who we are and what we do. Among its plenteous resources, many of its liturgies and hymns are testimonies to past communities of faith throughout the Church universal, from which we have much to learn and of which we will do well to remember. Through its use, we affirm that we need to know the example of Christians in the past in order to witness to Christ faithfully today.

The use of historic worship resources as a testimony to truth illustrates how we are limited to Christ's Church. Past truth is not relative to its time, nor is present truth to be regarded progressive to the present. Rather, we are limited

to that long-standing Church tradition to which we also have been called. From this, we are limited further from proposing our own individual opinions about faith and practice to be adopted or imposed as a new communal truth. Our task instead as Christians is to uphold and proclaim "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

#### God Has Limited Us to Christ Jesus

Some say that we should not speak of only believing in Jesus. When we do, we confine ourselves from recognizing the richness of awareness that one Divine Spirit or Creative, Transforming Presence permeates every religion. We also restrict ourselves to thinking foolishly that God is to be found only in our system of belief. Instead, we should be prepared to experience a "Copernican revolution" in our thinking which replaces "Christ" with "God" at the center of our universe of faiths. Or, we should be open to the possibility that "Christ" means Jesus to us but might mean someone or something else to another. Is that what we should do? No! God has limited us to Christ Jesus.

We must trust that Scripture and the Church's historic teaching on it make the matter clear: Christ is Jesus, and Christ Jesus is God. Matthew's Gospel (after the Septuagint version of the prophecy of Isaiah) states:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us). (Matt. 5:23)

John's Gospel expressed Christ Jesus, the sole Incarnation of

God, in another way:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:14)

There is therefore no other Christ than Jesus, who was born in one certain time specifically of Jewish flesh. We are limited by God to believe that there has never nor ever will be any other Incarnation of God in any place. In this, we confess Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God for all people.

What about other times and places? Is "Christ" to be found there? Some would have us suppose that "Christ" can be named in these times and places apart from the name of Jesus. But we Christians are limited from making any such assertion. Nearly three decades ago, one Lutheran leader illustrated this principle by writing:

Our missionaries in India find that Hindu religionists are happy to encourage the Christian faith if the Christian Church would drop the claim that Christ is the Savior of the world. There are some things in Hinduism that one can commend as far as ethics and religion are concerned. But it has been properly said: "Christianity is the end of all religion." No matter how religious I may be, before a Holy God who knows the innermost thoughts of my heart, I am and will always in this life remain a sinner. I am saved only by God's forgiveness for Jesus' sake.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Christ Jesus never will be found within the context of any other religion. If one would find Christ, one must believe in Jesus. When Christians point others to Christ, they must invite others to believe specifically and only in Jesus.

God Is Revealed to All

Some say that we should not speak of believing in Jesus without asking others what they believe in, too. When we do, we confine ourselves from discovering the richness of religious belief which comes from dialogue. Instead, some say that we should affirm that God has touched the lives of all people, and that we may have something to learn from them about what we believe. We may learn through dialogue that they, like us, will be saved through Christ in the end through their own religions. Or it may be that through the process of dialogue we will find that our own beliefs incorporate those of others and thus are transformed for the better while we, in turn, seek to incorporate belief in Christ and thus transform the beliefs of others. Shall we do this? No!

To be certain, God is not absent from people who do not believe in Jesus. God does bless all people, and in this, we confess that God who created the world is revealed and, by their observance, is known abstractly by everyone in the world. Accordingly, St. Paul wrote:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. (Romans 2:19-20a)

The will and purpose of God to create and sustain life is accomplished in this world through those who do not believe in Jesus as well as through those who do. The congregation

I serve is located in one of North America's largest cities. The hospitals I visit nearby employ some of the most competent physicians in the world. In the international community where we are, among these physicians are Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Moslems, Jews, all blessed by the true God with ability, intellect, and resources to practice medicine most capably. In the neighborhood near the congregation live some Moslem families who came to this country recently from the Middle East. They tend their gardens superbly. When God told the first people to have "dominion over...the earth" (Gen. 1:28), God meant of course that farmers who bow to Allah are just as responsible for the care of this planet as farmers who believe in Jesus. This will and purpose of God to create and sustain life may be called God's natural revelation, by which the God who is yet hidden is in this way revealed to all.

But to say that God is revealed to all is not to say that God has from this saved all. It is one thing for everyone to believe that there is a God, but another thing entirely for some to know that God in Christ Jesus has saved them. God's natural revelation does come to all, but this comes not as a blessing but rather as a judgment upon all. St. Paul's letter to the Romans expressed the matter in this way.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. So they are without excuse, for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. (Rom. 2:18, 20b-21)

God's natural revelation does not equal and must not be confused with what may be called God's saving revelation. A Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, or Jew, among all others, certainly will be faithful to some conception of "God." But this person still does not know God fully for salvation because one can know God only in a saving relationship through believing in Jesus. To be sure, there are offered "many mansions" for everyone to live in with Jesus, as expressed in John's Gospel, but this offer is based upon the truth that

Jesus said..., "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me." (John 14:6)

"The Wages of Sin is Death"

My friend Mildred is very worried about her friend Mohammed. He is a good and kind man, but he does not believe in Jesus. She is afraid that if he doesn't he will die in his sins and go to a place we usually call Hell. Is she right?

There is no single definition of Hell in Scripture, nor is there any uniform reason described for why one would go there. For example, Matthew's Gospel mentions frequently that the wicked will enter the "outer darkness," but are sent there not because they do not believe but rather because they fail to act rightly. To describe Hell, many refer to the parable in which the Son of Man separates the people of the nations as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. Here, the wicked are consigned "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). But, again, these are



sent there not because they will not believe in Jesus but rather because they fail to care for the poor and needy as God commands. Finally, many refer to the "lake of fire" (Rev. 20:10), but this appears to be reserved for the devil and his false prophet. In any event, no one is punished here for not believing in Jesus. Have Christians made a terrible mistake, misrepresenting God over the centuries by speaking of Hell at all? Or is Hell real nonetheless?

Perhaps, to speak of Hell in this particular way alone has neither been consistent with nor faithful to the message of salvation in Christ Jesus. But according to Scripture, the truth remains that God does judge people for their sins. When sin entered the world, the Biblical tradition asserts that God dismissed the first people from eternal paradise to face death (Genesis 3). It is this sin in us--both all that we are and do against God and against other people--which brings about for us and in us the eventuality of death with all the suffering in life which leads up to it. Thus, while we might not think there is a Hell for unbelievers, we must confess that people who do not believe in Jesus will be punished forever. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

I have officiated at scores of funerals. Generally, a funeral provides the pastor a superb opportunity to give comfort to the bereaved by proclaiming that the one who died now lives forever with Jesus. A pastor can say this with confidence if he or she knows that this person died believing

in Jesus. The most difficult funeral I have ever officiated was in the presence of people whose father, who died, had consciously denied believing in Jesus. Neither this man nor his children had any relationship whatsoever with the Church; his son had contacted me through the Yellow Pages simply to find a minister to, as he put it, "to give Dad a decent funeral." When I asked the children my customary question, "Do you know if he was a Christian?" that son replied, "No, I can't say he was. He wanted absolutely nothing to do with God or Jesus all his life, right up to the time he was asked about this for the last time as he lay on his deathbed. But can't you say that somehow he's okay now?" No, I couldn't. I didn't press the issue further. At the funeral, I did provide assurance to these young adult children that God's saving help was offered to them readily and freely as they would face the tough challenges of days ahead without their father. As much as I wanted to say otherwise, for the sake of the Gospel itself I could not in this one, horribly difficult funeral give false assurances about a salvation which Scripture and Confession--and the pastoral office to which I am called by their authority--had limited me to not say.

Like it or not, Christians have been led over the centuries to affirm that there is indeed a Hell for those who will not believe in Christ Jesus. Luther's commentary on this subject within his explanation of the third article of the

Apostles' Creed (quoted here again as earlier) leaves us with its stark reality.

These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

If we stop here, we say that only those who believe in Jesus as their God will be saved. Surely, if we want no one in this world to be lost, we will work all the harder to invite everyone to believe in Jesus, too. There would be nothing more to say.

But Scripture does have something more to say about the matter. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). God's will for humanity, and for all creation indeed, is not to consign all to Hell but rather to provide something else entirely.

#### God Wills That Everyone Be Saved

It is true that Scripture does describe God's judgment for all who will not believe in Jesus. But Scripture also affirms that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). This could mean simply that God's intention is that all would be saved. Or,

this could imply that in the end God will save all.

Some say that we should not speak of believing in Jesus only today. When we do, we confine ourselves to thinking that God is limited to saving the world only according to what we perceive God's will to be. We also restrict ourselves from knowing and finding comfort in the truth that God will accomplish all God wills, beyond our perceptions. So instead, we should be prepared to consider the possibility that God offers salvation to all through both the "ordinary" means of the Christian faith and the "extraordinary" means of the world religions. Is that what we should do?

We cannot respond to this question with an immediate No! According to this view, God will destroy all evil and thus give eternal life to every person. We have Scriptural warrant for considering this possibility, for St. Paul expressed the concept in this way.

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. "For God has put all things in subjection under his feet." When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone. (Rom. 15:21-22, 27a, 28)

Accordingly, in the end "all things," including all people, will be brought to God. This is accomplished specifically and only in Christ Jesus. But note that this view does not stipulate that one must first believe in Jesus in order to be brought before God. There does not appear here any idea of

punishment. Because God wills that everyone shall be saved, God shall save everyone.

Scripture thus provides us the possibility of **both** options. On the one hand, when God judges everyone, they who do not believe in Jesus will die in eternal punishment. Here, we cannot rule out the possibility of Hell. But on the other hand, when God saves everyone, both they who do and they who do not believe in Jesus will live forever in Heaven.

Carried to its merely logical conclusions, the idea that all will be saved in the end implies that it is not important after all for Christians to invite others to believe in Jesus as their Lord, Savior, and God. Some have speculated that this view means that followers of other religions ought to continue in their beliefs as they always have been, for those religions are simply ways which God uses to prepare them for this ultimate salvation. Some suggest that Christ is to be found in these religions. Some go farther to say that if this ultimate salvation were to come about, the idea of "Christ" is neither relevant nor necessary for today's world. Many might conclude, Why bother to speak of Jesus at all?

#### We Must Speak to Everyone of Believing in Jesus

From what I know, my friend Mildred assumes that the one God will forever punish all who follow other gods because they do not know Jesus. From what I could tell, my friend Manny assumed that the one God is the same God who saves all whether or not they know Jesus. Though their views exclude one

another, both are possible. In one way, by logic, to place these two positions side by side can present for us an impossible contradiction. But in another way, by faith, they can be held together in a healthy tension with each other. For "with God, all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

It surely is an existential possibility that all humankind will be saved at the end of time by God. In this, we would trust that God in Christ will accomplish that desire that all are "to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." We certainly would hope that this will be so, for we would want that salvation which is offered to and received by us in Christ to be offered to and received by all. The Lutheran Confessions do not actually state this, but on the basis of Scripture, the basis of those Confessions, we may have hope.

But at the same time, we are not to turn this existential possibility into a confessional statement. The Confessions do not confess the reality of a universal salvation, so neither should we. When we want to do this--even as I would have wanted to do so for that man who had wanted nothing to do with Jesus--we merely speculate our ideas about God without basing them on the authority of Scripture and Confession. It is dangerous to depart from the traditions which God has placed before us to follow. Those before us made no such confessional statement of a universal salvation then; we too should make no such statement now.

God's Truth and Our Mission

To some, "it was devil worship" which has no place whatsoever among Christians. Someone inserted a Lakota "sage blessing" into of all settings a Eucharist. To some others it was "a meaningful and sensitive call to worship" and the sort of exposure to other religions which Christians need. Is this what we should do?

No! The Church lives solely to proclaim Christ Jesus and only Jesus! There is no reason why we Christians should ever incorporate or even think of utilizing the truth-claims of another religion within our own. These do not point to the true God, and as such do not help us.

To the cautious, someone's opinion that in this day and age it is wrong to call anyone "saved" or "lost" and that all religions are pathways to God is one more indication that the devil is at work. A Lutheran pastor, of all people, espoused such views on a radio talk show. To the curious, this is no mere opinion but rather a wonderful prospect for the future. Is this what we should think?

No! The Church lives solely to proclaim Christ Jesus and only Jesus! Even though it is possible that all will be saved, we should confess and proclaim Christ Jesus **as though** all who do not believe in Jesus will be lost. This is our mission: to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to which God has called us and has limited us. For "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts

4:12).

I have one more story to tell, about one's salvation which we witnessed here. Lin Wu was a student in our congregation's elementary school. She was bright, articulate, and had come to this country from Asia only a few weeks before. She and her family were Buddhists who worshipped in the temple (formerly a church building) down the street from our church and school. Because her parents wanted her to adapt quickly to America, and because they believed that to be a good American means to be a Christian, they enrolled her in our school. She attended for four months.

This girl had never once heard of Jesus. We have several students like her. Our policy is to tell about the Gospel of Christ Jesus in all our classes, but never to insist or even to ask publicly that the children believe it. We serve only to proclaim, and trust the Holy Spirit for whatever responses will result. At the end of her four months--for as a sixth grader she was in our oldest class--Lin Wu graduated. After we held graduation exercises in our sanctuary for her and her classmates on a weekday evening, we all adjourned to our social hall for refreshments. I shall never forget what she said to her teacher there. Though stumbling over words in not quite fluent English, Lin Wu--who had known only Buddhism before--said, "Thank you for teaching me. I will never forget Jesus." This was not a word of one whose present religion had been transformed, but rather the testimony of one who, we



learned, gave up that religion to believe in Jesus as Lord, Savior, and God.

Lin Wu's teacher is a missionary. We need not send her overseas, for people from overseas come to us. Mildred is a missionary. Someone from overseas has come to her, too. It is her duty and privilege to talk with her neighbor and friend Mohammed about Jesus. For all we Christians know, those who do not know Jesus will be lost in eternal death, but will be saved for eternal life if they do believe in Jesus. We must invite every person who does not know Him to believe in Him as their Lord, Savior, and only God as though they will die forever otherwise.

Two Opposing Views: There Can Be Only One for Us

It does matter that Christians invite others to follow Jesus, too, to believe in Him as their Lord, Savior, and only God. For while we have seen that indeed there are two ways to think about believing in Jesus in today's religiously pluralistic world, only one of those can be possible for us to believe. The God who created the world may well choose to save all creation. But this is not for us to know. We cannot believe according to two opposing views of salvation. There can be only one for us. We are limited to knowing and proclaiming to others the sole Incarnate God, Christ Jesus, as testified to us by Scripture and Confession.

I wish I had one more story to tell, about one's salvation which we cannot witness here. Manny lives with his

Lord in Heaven. He believed in Jesus, and also believed that those who did not believe in Jesus in ways which we could witness here would live with Jesus, too. Perhaps he is right; we certainly may hope so. But we cannot know so in this time and place. One future day when we see the Lord face to face, we will fully understand such matters (1 Cor. 13:12). In the meantime, we still must invite others to believe specifically in Jesus **as though** otherwise they would not be saved.

## NOTES

## CHAPTER 4

1 C. Daniel Lindstrom, "In My Opinion...", Praxis [newsletter of the Sierra Pacific Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America], September 1989.

2 Gordon Selbo, "In My Opinion...", Praxis, October 1989.

3 Richard Trussell, "In My Opinion...", Praxis, December 1989.

4 Fredrik A. Schoitz, Letter to Marx C. Scott, 19 Oct. 1962, Church Council Minutes, Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Los Angeles, Archives.

5 Tappert, 419.

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